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ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest that in times of growing liberalism in public opinion, social and political attitudes in all age cohorts become more tolerant. Such studies have challenged the long standing assumptions that social and political attitudes become more conservative as people age. To extend the research on this subject, a study was conducted to determine whether, in this present period of liberal and tolerant racial attitudes, the perspectives on race relations held by older adults have also become more liberal. Data were taken from seven surveys of noninstitutionalized older adults in the continental United States conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago between 1963 and 1982. Five questions administered to all white respondents measured attitudes towards school and neighborhood desegregation, interracial marriage, and interracial socializing. Results further undermine the aging-attitudinal rigidity hypothesis. Liberal shifts equal to those found among younger cohorts existed in all elderly cohorts surveyed. Research documenting attitude change among older persons should begin to counter stereotypes of the elderly as dogmatic, rigid people. (LP)

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COHORT CHANGES IN ATTITUDES ABOUT RACE RELATIONS

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Paper presented at the 1983 Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Francisco, California, November 20.

Two assumptions have long dominated academic and popular thinking about the nature of attitude change that occurs as persons grow older. The first is that social and political attitudes become more conservative. According to this position, attitude change does occur, but it is in the direction of adopting more conservative and traditional attitudes.

In contrast, the second position holds that attitudinal rigidity and inflexibility come with aging. The underlying assumption, here, seems to be that the rate of change progressively diminishes as persons increasingly "become set in their ways".

The tenability of these assumptions about the manner in which social and political attitudes change with aging has recently been challenged, and several deficiencies are apparent.

For one, much of the earlier empirical evidence presumably supporting a link between aging and a shift toward conservative social and political attitudes has been based on the results of single cross-sectional studies. Of course, as Warner Schaie (1967), Matilda Riley (1973), and many others have pointed out, this is a shaky basis for inferring age changes.

Second, even if age differences observed in cross-sectional data could be attributed to changes accompanying aging, the claim that aging results in growing conservatism would run counter to the findings of several studies showing that older persons express more liberal attitudes on some issues than younger persons (Campbell, 1971; Foner, 1972) and that there are no age differences on others (Cutler et al., 1980; Holsti and Rosenau, 1980).

The most telling critique, however, comes from the few diachronic studies of aging and attitude change that have been conducted. Some (Cutler and

Kaufman, 1975; Nunn et al., 1978; Glenn, 1980) show a general pattern of absolute change in a liberal direction for all cohorts, but at a slower rate among the older cohorts. Other studies (Cutler et al., 1980; Smith, 1981) have demonstrated that tolerant and liberal attitudes have increased, but at a rate which is constant across all cohorts included in the analysis.

Thus, the available evidence suggests that, in times of growing liberalism in public opinion, older cohorts appear to be part of that trend, but the jury is still out on the question of whether there is appreciable inter-cohort variation in the rate of change. However, only a limited amount of research has been undertaken, and only a limited range of social and political attitudes has been examined. Norval Glenn's assessment in 1980 (634) that "...little is known and much remains to be learned" continues to be valid.

In this paper, then, the scope of the available evidence is extended to include attitudes about race relations. During a period generally characterized by increasingly liberal and tolerant racial attitudes (Taylor et al., 1978), have the race relations attitudes of older cohorts shifted in the same direction? If so, is there inter-cohort variation in the rate at which change has occurred, or is the rate more nearly equal across all cohorts?

METHODS

Data Sets

The data for the analysis were taken from seven surveys of the non-institutionalized, adult population of the contiguous United States. Each of the surveys was conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at

the University of Chicago, and they cover the period from 1963 through 1982. Some basic information about each, including the years in which they were conducted and their total sample sizes, is given in Table A.

TABLE A ABOUT HERE

Measures of Attitudes About Race Relations

To measure change in attitudes about race relations, five questions common to each of the seven surveys and asked of all white respondents have been used. The specific questions, their response categories, and the scoring systems are listed in Table B.

TABLE B ABOUT HERE

In the interest of economy of presentation, the data will be given in the form of a summary index. The Guttman coefficients of reproducibility, the average inter-item correlations, and the alpha coefficients presented in Table 2 seemed to justify treating the items in a composite manner. (I apologize for the tables being out of sequence here.) Consequently, indexes were constructed in each survey by summing respondents' scores over the five items. The resulting scores range from 0 to 5, with higher scores representing more liberal racial attitudes.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Analysis Design

The methodological design used in the study is cross-sequential analysis (Schaie, 1965; Riley et al., 1972). This strategy allows the dependent variable score for a sample of a (birth) cohort at one time to be compared

with the dependent variable scores of one or more independent samples of that same cohort at later times. Examination of the scores of several cohorts in this manner yields descriptive information about the existence and direction of intra-cohort change as well as information about inter-cohort variation in the extent of change. Table 1 describes the specific design to be used in this analysis -- that is, the five cohorts on which comparable attitudinal and background data are available in the seven surveys.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

A problem confronting all cohort analysts is that attrition from cohorts over time is differentially distributed by sex and socioeconomic status. (Race is another source of compositional effects, but restricting the analysis to whites removes this potential confound.) For instance, differential mortality results in a cohort that becomes more elite in regard to its level of educational attainment. Because attitudes about race relations are related to education, such differential attrition would have the artifactual result of producing more liberal scores for a cohort owing to its changing compositional characteristics. This type of problem is handled through the use of Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA), a multivariate technique yielding adjusted mean scores on a dependent variable for each category of a predictor variable after the effects attributable to other predictors are partialled out. Thus, for each survey, MCA is used to produce the mean index score for each cohort, adjusted for possible compositional effects due to education and sex. Examination of the adjusted mean scores within cohorts over time will indicate patterns of intra-cohort change, while examination of inter-cohort differences will yield additional information about the maintenance, divergence, or convergence of these differences.

RESULTS

Detailed results of the analysis are presented in Table 3 and portrayed graphically in Figure 1. Highlights include the following.

TABLE 3 AND FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Note first the row labeled "Total" in Table 3. These figures give the total or grand mean scores in each of the seven surveys for the five cohorts considered collectively. Recalling that higher scores on this index represent more liberal or tolerant attitudes, these data point to a clear increase in tolerance from 1963 to 1982. Although the slope of the change has not been constant, the entire era can still be viewed as one in which liberal attitudes about race relations have become more prevalent among these five cohorts taken as a whole.

Such aggregate shifts, of course, can mask considerable variability in both the direction and extent of change within each of the cohorts. To see if there is any evidence of a conservative drift or of attitudinal rigidity, especially among the older cohorts, we next examine the changes for each of them. There are some fluctuations and departures from linearity, but the overall patterns in this regard are fairly consistent. Using the simplest measure -- the difference between a cohort's index score in 1982 and in 1963 -- it is evident that change characterizes all of the cohorts, and that the attitudes of each have shifted in a liberal direction. Another way of reaching the same conclusion is to note that the 1980 and 1982 scores for each cohort are higher than the 1970 and 1972 scores, while the scores from the

early 1970s in turn are consistently higher than those recorded for 1963. Still another perspective on these findings is that neither the stable scores that might be predicted by an aging-rigidity hypothesis nor the declining scores that the aging-conservatism hypothesis would predict are in evidence. Rather, all of the cohorts have participated in the shift toward more liberal or tolerant attitudes about race relations.

If absolute change in a liberal direction occurred among all of the cohorts, are there any indications of inter-cohort variation in the rate or extent of change? Focusing on the inter-cohort differences in each of the surveys, it can be noted that the younger cohorts started out in 1963 as more liberal than the older cohorts. That difference -- statistically significant in five of the seven surveys -- has persisted for the most part over the entire period. But since the extent of change betwen 1963 and 1982 among the older cohorts is virtually identical to that of the younger cohorts, the initial inter-cohort differences have been maintained and have not changed appreciably. Looking at either the column giving the extent of change that has taken place or the column expressing that change as the ratio of a cohort's change to the aggregate change, it is apparent that the shift among the two older cohorts has been nearly equivalent to the shift observed among the two younger cohorts. Thus, the data give no evidence of attitude change occurring at a significantly slower rate among the older cohorts.

If anything, there is a hint of some U-shaped curvilinearity. The greatest changes have taken place in the youngest and oldest cohorts, a lesser amount of change has occurred in the adjacent cohorts, and the least change has taken place in the middle cohort. It is not readily apparent yet why that

cohort has lagged behind the others, although conceivably the cumulative impact on schooling, housing, and employment of civil rights legislation and changes in societal attitudes about race relations could have had a greater impact on a cohort at that stage of the life course. Accounting for this variation in the perceived impact of or threat from improved race relations is an issue that obviously needs to be addressed.

CONCLUSIONS

Let me conclude by tying these findings in with the results of the earlier studies, by taking stock of what all of the available evidence indicates about the main issue, and by mentioning a few of the implications that follow from this research.

First and foremost, the results of this analysis deal still another blow to the aging-rigidity and the aging-conservatism hypotheses. The liberal shifts on race relations attitudes among each of the cohorts are consistent with all of the previous research showing that the sociopolitical attitudes of older cohorts do change; that, in times of growing liberalism in public opinion, they change in a liberal direction; and that, on some issues (abortion and race relations), the change that has occurred among the older cohorts has equalled the change taking place among the younger cohorts.

More generally, the occurrence of attitude change among older persons should serve to counter stereotypes of the elderly as dogmatic, rigid, inflexible, and set in their ways. And, if the attitudes of older persons are of consequence for their health practices (Shanas and Maddox, 1976), for the

utilization of supportive sevices to which they are entitled (Beattie, 1976), and for their safety -- to cite just a few areas -- knowledge of the potential for attitude change is of considerable significance to practitioners and service providers. To paraphrase Coward (1979:279), it is critical for all human-service practitioners and planners -- across the spectrum of community types -- to assure that their programs are built on real and not assumed capabilities. Or, as Norval Glenn (1977:24) has observed in a similar vein:

> ...persons directing campaigns to change attitudes and behavior who "write off" older persons as a "lost cause" are making a serious strategic error if in fact many older persons are ammenable to many kinds of change.

Those who attempt to shape public opinion or to change attitudes so as to enhance well-being and who regard the elderly as attitudinally rigid and inflexible would indeed appear to be mistaken.

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Table A. Data Sources[a]

Year	Source	Survey	N
1963	NORC	SRS #330	1,557
1970	NORC	SRS #4100	1,490
1972	NORC	GSS	1,613
1976	NORC	GSS	1,499
1977	NORC	GSS	1,530
1980	NORC	GSS	1,468
1982	NORC	GSS	1,506

[a]Abbreviations: National Opinion Research Center (NORC); Survey Research Service (SRS); General Social Survey (GSS).

Table B. Items and Scoring

1. Do you think white students and (Negro/Black) students should go to the same schools or to separate schools? ("separate" = 0, "same" = 1) (RACSCHOL)

2. White people have a right to keep (Negroes/Blacks) out of their neighborhoods if they want to, and (Negroes/Blacks) should respect that right. ("agree strongly" and "agree somewhat" = 0, "disagree somewhat" and "disagree strongly" = 1) (RACSEG)

3. (Negroes/Blacks) shouldn't push themselves where they're not wanted. (Scored as in 2 above) (RACPUSH)

4. Do you think there should be laws against marriages between (Negroes/Blacks) and whites? ("yes" = 0, "no" = 1) (RACMAR)

5. How strongly would you object if a member of your family wanted to bring a (Negro/Black) friend home to dinner? ("strongly" and "mildly" = 0, "not at all" = 1) (RACDIN)

Table 2. Properties of Race Relations Attitudes Index

	1963	1970	1972	1976	1977	1980	1982	Mean
Coefficient of Reproducibility	.860	.872	.883	.893	.889	.873	.896	.881
Average Inter-item Correlation	.407	.368	.339	.365	.341	.312	.360	.356
Alpha	.774	.745	.719	.742	.721	.694	.738	.733

Table 1. Specific Representation of the Cross-Sequential Design Used for the Analysis of Cohort Changes in Attitudes About Race Relations

Birth Cohort	1963		1970		1972		1976		1977		1980		1982	
	Age	N	Age	N	Age	N	Age	N	Age	N	Age	N	Age	N
1934-1942	21-29	221	28-36	146	30-38	184	34-42	196	35-43	203	38-46	155	40-48	144
1924-1933	30-39	246	37-46	150	39-48	185	43-52	157	44-53	199	47-56	161	49-58	178
1914-1923	40-49	243	47-56	179	49-58	198	53-62	186	54-63	201	57-66	168	59-68	162
1904-1913	50-59	154	57-66	155	59-68	135	63-72	134	64-73	135	67-76	110	69-78	105
-1903	60+	215	67+	188	69+	121	73+	108	74+	60	77+	48	79+	48
Total		1,079		818		823		781		798		642		637

Table 3. Net Mean Scores[a] on Race Relations Attitudes Index[b,c]

Birth Cohort	1963	1970	1972	1976	1977	1980	1982	1963-1982 Change[d]	Cohort to Total Change Ratio
1934-1942	2.30	2.71	2.97	3.04	3.07	3.07	3.43	+1.13	1.14
1924-1933	2.27	2.29	2.99	2.95	3.18	3.08	3.21	+ .94	.95
1914-1923	2.11	2.32	2.71	2.85	2.68	2.83	2.89	+ .78	.79
1904-1913	2.02	2.46	2.75	2.62	2.63	2.79	2.92	+ .90	.91
-1903	1.83	2.22	2.44	2.69	2.58	3.05	2.93	+1.10	1.11
Total	2.12	2.39	2.80	2.86	2.89	2.96	3.11	+ .99	
p[e]	.033	.048	.012	.111	.001	.247	.009		
Beta	.101	.104	.126	.099	.157	.087	.140		

[a] Controlling for sex and education.

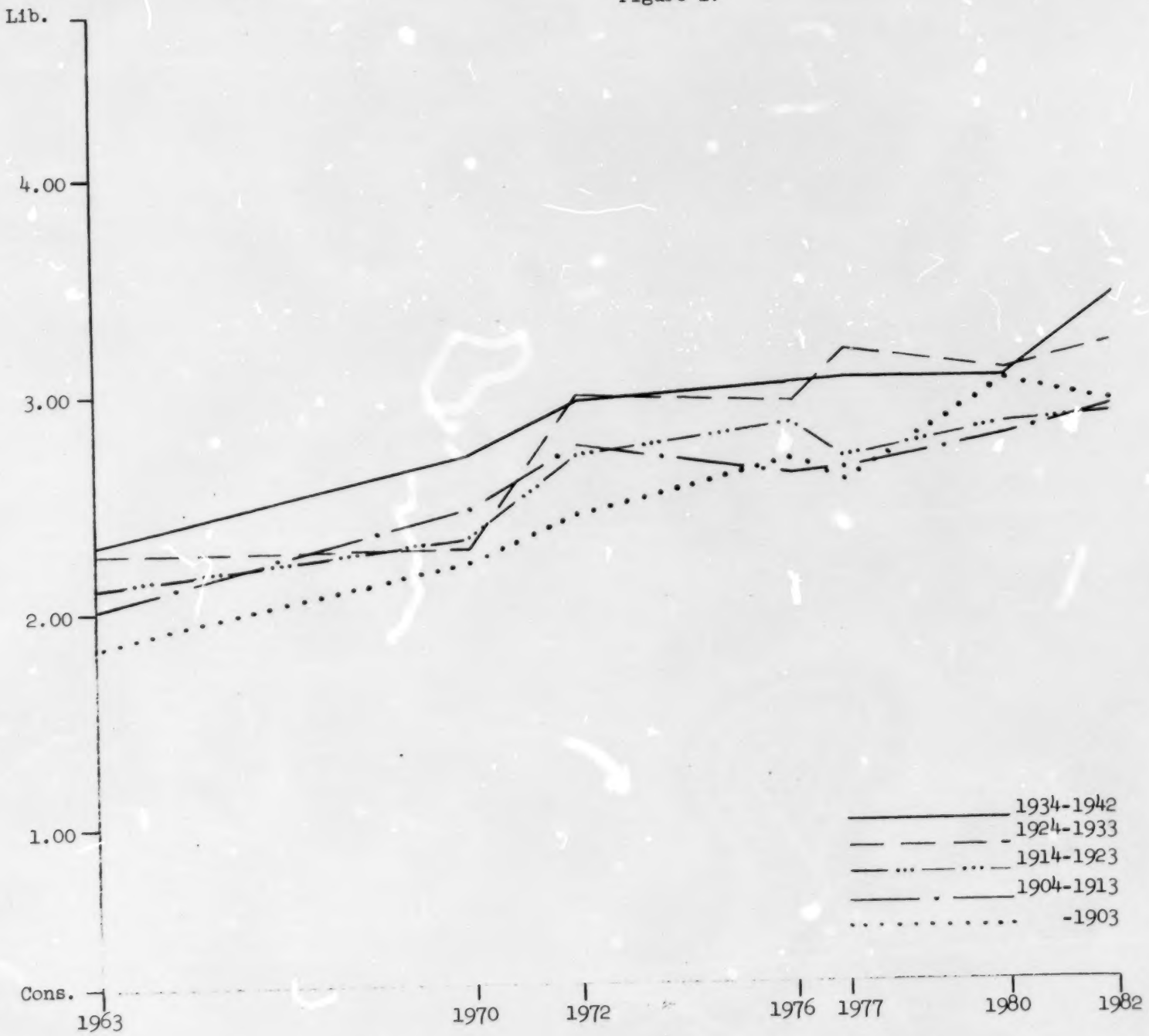
[b] Scores range from 0 (conservative) to 5 (liberal).

[c] The Ns on which this analysis is based are given in Table 1.

[d] This measure of change is the difference between a cohort's score in 1982 and 1963.

[e] $F_{(net)}$-tests for cohort differences.

Figure 1.


Lib.
4.00
3.00
2.00
1.00
Cons.
1963
1970
1972
1976
1977
1980
1982
1934-1942
1924-1933
1914-1923
1904-1913
-1903